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ABSTRACT

The federal role in education is active when the issues are national in scope (such as in ensuring equal educational opportunities), when a unified research agenda is the issue, or when the problem is assessing the progress of education. The role is reactive when the government must be responsive to the needs of the states and local school districts in the three areas just mentioned. The federal position is not to dictate educational policy to the states and local education agencies. Rather, the government intends the states and local districts to have even more responsibility to determine the direction of educational priorities and programs in the future. (Author/IRT)

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
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SPEAKER: Virginia Trotter, Assistant U. S. Secretary for Education, Washington, D.C.

TOPIC: The Federal Role: Active or Reactive?

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Summary of Remarks:

It is indeed an honor for me to address this Bicentennial Convention of the American Association of School Administrators.

Our Nation's Bicentennial Celebration elicits two distinct reactions in me -- both as an American citizen and as an educator. And I imagine it is affecting many of you similarly. Our minds and our senses are being bombarded by so much commercialism that I somehow wish we could escape from its persistence.

By contrast, I find much that is constructive and inspiring in the attempt we now are making as a nation to comprehend where we have been and what we have done in the first two centuries as a nation. More important to all of us here is the impetus the Bicentennial is giving to our thinking about the future and deciding what we wish to accomplish in the years to come.

The Bicentennial challenges us as educators to understand and to cope with the educational practices -- good and bad -- that have been carried forward through the years-- so that a more enlightened educational system may be created.

Over the past 200 years, American society has been characterized by rapid change. And it has been the particular burden of our educational system -- more than any other of our society's institutions -- to respond effectively, I believe we have done this in a way of which we can be proud.

Remember, ours was the first nation ever to commit itself to the ideal that "all men are created equal" -- equal by sex, race, economic status, and the like. Hence, we were the first nation seriously committed to provide equal educational opportunity to all.

This is not to say that our current educational system is perfect. There are many inadequacies -- policies and practices in schools that are detrimental to students. The elimination of these deserves our most concentrated efforts. Yet at the same time, our Nation's schools are offering many good things to students. More and more schools are becoming flexible and humane in a way that enables students to grow intellectually and socially to their fullest capacities. Increasingly, our schools are providing the framework within which students can aspire to the American ideal of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

It has been your hard work and that of AASA that has helped make this possible.

The United States Constitution does not make provisions for public education. Traditionally, however, the individual states have supported our educational system. And yet, the commitment of the Federal Government to education is historic. Early Federal interest was documented in ordinances in the post-revolutionary era. The establishment of land-grant colleges in 1862 and grants for vocational education in 1917 were milestones in

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Federal aid. The U.S. Office of Education, formed in 1867, is one of the oldest Government agencies.

Today I would like to address the issue of the Federal role in American education. Is it active or reactive? What are its characteristics? And, particularly today, how is it benefiting school administrators?

When we attempt to define when there is and is not an appropriate Federal responsibility in education, we are subject to a general constraint: that is -- the support and conduct of education is primarily a non-Federal responsibility.

In American society, we do not have the kind of centralized ministry-of-education system present in a number of other countries. Instead, we have a highly decentralized State, local, and private system -- and there seems to be no serious political force in American society which would fundamentally alter the present division of responsibility. Therefore, whenever we consider any proposed Federal education initiative or program, we must first ask what the special and compelling circumstances are which make it a Federal rather than a state, local, private, or individual task.

With this fundamental consideration in mind, I would like to suggest several basic ways we can determine Federal responsibilities in education. First, I strongly believe there is an appropriate role for the Federal government in addressing educational needs and problems which are national in scope and consequence. These are areas in which the social and economic health of the nation -- or the fundamental rights of individuals -- are at stake.

For example, the existence of a group of children who do not have equal educational opportunity in any real sense has increasingly been recognized. Local school districts have been unable to give adequate education to a significant portion of the population -- the economically disadvantaged, the handicapped, children from non-English speaking homes, and others.

Serious society-wide consequences flow from their lack of adequate education -- lower productivity, higher unemployment, increased welfare burdens -- and a general inability of these children to lead satisfying lives or to carry out their responsibilities as citizens. The increased difficulty in educating these disadvantaged children exceeds both the capability and resources of local school systems. And because the consequences of their inadequate education are both serious and national in scope -- the Federal Government should provide assistance to help states and local school systems.

What we are doing to help school districts cope with poor readers illustrates this. Approximately 12 percent of all children enrolled in elementary and secondary education in this country are receiving individually-tailored instruction in reading through our Title I program. Title I is an authority under the elementary and secondary education act that provides funds to school districts to help educationally disadvantaged youngsters from low-income areas. Most significant about Title I is that it lets school districts design their own programs to help these children. It is suggested by the law that priority attention be given to basic skills in reading and math. Though districts may use the money for other services, as well -- our focus on poor readers is not diminished.

We in the Education Division realize that to effectively meet the special needs of disadvantaged children in these programs -- school administrators and teachers need parenta

input. Hence, we have paved the way for active involvement of parents by making parent advisory councils a requisite under Title I at the district and building level. We have found that when parents are involved, children do better in school.

This requirement for parental participation has broken the barrier of distrust that often exists between the school and the disadvantaged community. We realize that it has put both school administrators and parents in new roles -- and has required serious cooperation from each. Administrators should be proud of the success they have had in eliciting parental support thus far. And please remember that we in the Education Division want to know about what has been effective in your districts in working with parents and students so that we can spread the knowledge of your successes to other school districts. Techniques that work with parents of disadvantaged children can work with any parents, and all school administrators would benefit from their dissemination.

Out of the 1960's came the educational hypothesis that early intervention in a child's education was the key to "better life chances." Hence, most school districts have designed their Title I programs to focus on teaching basic skills in grades one through three. The concentration in these early grades has been on reading -- and more particularly, on decoding skills -- that is, word recognition -- at the expense of reading and comprehension. Not surprisingly, where these early compensatory efforts have left off we have seen declines in test scores.

Our research tells us that nine-year-olds are reading better than ever. But after that point -- around the fourth grade level -- we see the test scores begin to drop.

In response, the National Institute of Education (the Education Division's Research and Development arm) is devoting 60 percent of its basic skills budget to this problem in reading. NIE intends to find out how schools can best make the transition from decoding to comprehension. We are asking the question: "Are our schools concentrating enough on teaching comprehension -- on teaching students to think?"

An important related issue is the role of the hand-held calculator. In grades one through six we spend hours drilling students in rote memory of mathematics. But in a few years, industry will have the price of calculators down to an affordable $5.00. This technological advancement may have a major impact on how we go about teaching math in the future. I see the beginning of a greater emphasis on teaching problem solving and estimating skills, for example. The issue of the calculator is still under debate throughout the education community, and the Education Division is in no way advocating a course of action with respect to it at this time. But these issues in math as well as those that affect reading skills have strong implications for the future of elementary and secondary education in this country. I believe that we are approaching a time when education must emphasize critical thinking, comprehension, and problem-solving techniques rather than rote skills. We must give our students the basic skills that will enable them to cope with the complexities of our society.

Regarding recent criticisms of the validity of standardized testing, our research shows that test scores and teacher impressions of students are highly correlated. The National Institute of Education did a series of studies in which, during the first few days of the school year, first graders were given a battery of common standardized tests. At the same time-- and before the test results were in -- and remember, this is before the teachers have had even a minimally adequate time to evaluate their students -- the teachers were asked to rate the students according to ability. When the teacher's initial impression and actual test scores were correlated -- they were surprisingly similar.

Since some people suspect the validity of these standardized tests, it follows that there may be reason to suspect the teachers' judgements, as well. How can we, then afford to do away with these standardized tests altogether -- as some would have it -- while the teachers' perceptions remain? Shouldn't we instead seek to develop better tests-- tests of whether students are learning the skills we want them to have?

As we have attempted to measure learning in the past, I believe there has been one general weakness. It is that we have tended to generalize our progress from the evaluation of just one year of schooling. It is time that we start to investigate what our long-term progress is by studying what happens to students and programs over an extended period of time. You'll be interested to know that for the next five years the Education Division will be studying the sustaining effects of compensatory education on basic skills. We are looking for results that will help school administrators to know what kind of intervention is best and what its effects are at various stages of a student's education. In addition, our follow-through program has plans to disseminate in the next two years information on different approaches to early education of disadvantaged children. They have found, for example, that children learn basic skills better in structured classroom situations -- and learn critical thinking and communications skills better in unstructured classrooms. All o these approaches discovered by follow-through require little extra money and should be readily applicable to your existing programs.

We are aware that one of the major problems facing local school districts is that of incorporating various Federal programs into efforts at the district level. Among other efforts, the National Institute of Education is studying how Title I programs are related to other Federal efforts such as bilingual education, as well as how Federal compensatory programs are coordinated with local school efforts. The results of this study will aid us in making recommendations that ease your jobs at the local level while insuring that Federal program goals are met.

Federal efforts to help local school districts provide educational equity span many special needs groups beyond the educationally disadvantaged. How to better deliver educational services to handicapped children is of primary concern. Too often schools use special education classes as dumping grounds for children who are too difficult to deal with. And worse, many truly handicapped children are not getting the educational services they deserve as they are isolated from the regular classroom and activities such as playing with the other children.

The Education Division recommends "mainstreaming" of many handicapped students. That is, handicapped children should be able to participate in the "least restrictive educational environment" -- which sometimes means the normal classroom setting. Every effort should be made to help these children feel less alienated and abnormal, and mainstreaming can help do this.

We know that school districts need assistance in accomplishing this. The Education Division puts about $100 million yearly into research, demonstration and dissemination of programs for education of the handicapped. Part of the money goes for in-service training of regular classroom teachers -- who understandably do not feel as confident working with handicapped children -- and funds for classroom aids, as well.

I see a trend toward capacity-building at the local level in handicapped education. As one example of this, Congress has enacted legislation under which, by 1978, States will qualify for Federal Assistance under a new formula. And by 1982, one-half the average per pupil expenditure will be authorized to be contributed by the Federal Government to states and local school districts. Currently, one-half the average per pupil expenditure is about $600 per year. In addition, we are trying to find ways for schools to deal with the hardest groups to mainstream --the severely handicapped. We hope to make it possible for children who have never participated in free public education to have the opportunity to do so to some extent.

Similarly, we are concerned with the eradication of sex discrimination in our Nation's schools. The Education Division is sponsoring a variety of programs and research initiatives to help administrators erase sex bias in its most blatant and most subtle forms. We are especially concerned with the lack of women in administrative positions in education. Men hold almost 99 percent of the superintendents' posts -- and even at the elementary school level, where women are in the overwhelming majority as teachers, 80 percent of the principals are men.

This June my office plans to sponsor a national conference at which will be presented practical knowledge on how to deal with the requirements of Title IX -- the Federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in educational institutions receiving Federal monies.

Title IX is a tremendous step forward because it assures by law equal rights and opportunities for women in all areas of education. But we cannot legislate sensitivity, awareness, and changes of attitude. I must say that AASA has been foremost among education associations in its sensitivity and awareness of the problems of sex discrimination. I commend you for the work you have done with the Education Division in sensitizing your membership to the issues. I trust your commitment will continue to be strong in the future.

Assuring educational equity is the basis for much that is the Federal role in education. There is, however, a second major role for the Federal government -- and it has to do with advancing the State of the Art on the quality and relevance of American education. The development of systematic knowledge which can advance and improve educational practice throughout the Nation clearly seems to be a Federal responsibility. It would make little sense to have all fifty states carrying out separate and redundant educational research programs. Therefore, educational research and development to discover more effective educational practice is a uniquely appropriate Federal role. It is to this role that the National Institute of Education addresses itself. And the Office of Education also supports important research within various program areas. The national government is in a unique position to provide developmental assistance designed to stimulate change and reform. Through the dissemination and demonstration of tested practices -- capacity building to improve an educational institution's capability to deliver services -- and, where necessary, by providing seed money for start-up services or other incentives to install new practices -- the Federal government can catalyze large changes with a comparatively small investment.

Of all of our research efforts in the Education Division, I would like to highlight what we are doing to help school districts improve their approaches to problem solving. One of the least remarked yet most important characteristics of people in schools with severe problems is the feeling of isolation and sense of powerlessness of virtually everyone in the organization. Each group in the school or district perceives others to have the power to change things -- and each feels itself entangled in a web of constraints.

From the perspective of the teacher, for example, the principal determines how the school will be organized, how discipline will be administered, who gets the desirable assignments, and how the discretionary funds available to the schools will be used. As the teacher often sees it, the principal introduces one "innovation" after another, mainly to further his or her own career. And despite his or her feeling helpless to affect the circumstances, the teacher is told that he or she will be held accountable for the results.

The principal often feels just as helpless as the teacher. Surveys show that principals have little time for thinking about the instruction students receive. They are too busy trying to maintain discipline, negotiating with contending pressure groups, processing a never-ending stream of paperwork for the central office, or responding to inquiries of concerned parents. Basic decisions of educational substance are made above him and below him teachers close their classroom doors and teach as they like. Yet the principal is held accountable for the performance of his school.

Everyone knows that the superintendent really calls the tune -- everyone but the superintendent. Many do not make it through the first term of their contract. The new superintendent knows that most of his subordinates have been there long before he arrived--and will be there long after he is gone. Everyone else knows that, too. The superintendent is painfully familiar with the ways of large bureaucracy can frustrate his initiatives without any individual ever being quite insubordinate. He knows that of ten key changes he wants to make during his tenure -- he will be fortunate to make modest progress on two.

A similar picture could be painted of the world as it looks to a school board member -- but the basic point is made. These perceptions clearly conflict with each other -- and yet there is a certain legitimacy to each. The problem is that each group is caught in a system which makes little provisions for people to come together to share perceptions, define problems, and plan and carry out solutions.

Until structures for problem-solving are established to promote the performance of these functions -- in ways suited to the problems and style of each district or school -- everyone in education will continue to feel powerless to alleviate problems that will remain with us.

Our research in local problem-solving at the National Institute of Education focuses on the manner in which schools and districts go about solving their problems. Everyone has ideas on how to improve schools. The issue here is: what happens to those ideas.

In this time of fiscal constraints, we need more urgently than ever to find out how to develop climates and organizational structures in and around schools that will allow staff and communityto jointly define problems and work out solutions to them. We need to create structures that recognize legitimate interests and promote genuine agreement on how best to use dwindling resources for diverse purposes. We are concerned in our research not only with what's to be done -- but with how to get it done.

Decision-making problems are characteristic of all school systems. Our current research is focusing on rural and urban settings -- those who most need help. But we recognize that people learn from the experience of others. Therefore, we are looking for ways to build informal networks to get people together to share their experience and ideas. Our research into school capacity for problem solving is new -- only 1 1/2 years old -- but we do expect to have strong impact in the near future on the capacity of school districts to engage in active searches for solutions to their own problems

The Education Division is also doing research and analysis which will enable states to select minimum standards and criteria for quality education. A number of states such as Oregon and California, -- New Jersey being the current leading example -- are embarking on programs of educational reform to assure each student a minimum degree of competency upon finishing high school. Some states are responding to State Legislatures and Court orders, others are taking the initiative to prevent the distressing situation of students graduating who cannot, for example, read or write at a minimum level of competency. In this era of accountability in education, I think we can expect other states to follow suit in requiring by law that students achieve certain levels of proficiency, and it stands to reason that the burden of accomplishing this will fall ultimately on the local school district. Though the criteria will vary from state to state, we in the Education Division are assisting states in developing general standards of competence. We are seeking to find the kinds of competencies students should be expected to acquire. In this way, we feel we are being responsive to your needs in this effort.

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The third issue in determining the Federal role lies in assessing the status and progress of American education. The original 1867 Act, establishing the U.S. Office of Education, states this as its primary mission. This, like research and development, is clearly an important educational function to be performed -- and one that makes sense as a responsibility of the Federal government rather than the individual states or local school districts. This activity, of course, is different from either research and development -- or the evaluation of specific education programs. It provides the necessary data over time to measure the general health and progress of the nation's education. By going beyond data collection to the analysis of past and future trends -- the Federal government can aid rational decision-making at the local, state, and national levels in order to produce a coordinated, planned approach to solving national educational problems.

Of particular interest to AASA members would be the implications of the latest projections of the National Center for Education Statistics on declining school enrollments. NCES statistics indicate that there will be small annual reductions in elementary school enrollments for the next five or six years. These decreases are directly attributable to the expected decline in the number of children aged 5 to 13 during this period. High school enrollment is expected to reach a peak in 1976 and then begin a series of small annual declines because of fewer young people of ages 14 to 17 years in the overall population.

In light of these declines, I see new directions for elementary and secondary educato to consider. We now have a better opportunity than ever before to expand pre-primary enrollments, place a greater emphasis on education of exceptional children such as the handicapped or gifted, and lower the pupil-teacher ratio.

NCES Predicts a continuing improvement in the pupil-teacher ratio, and accompanying this is the fact that, as indicated in a study by the National Education Association, Publi School Teachers in the 1970's are better prepared academically than those who taught in previous decades. Clearly, now is the time when educators can concentrate on quality, rath than quantity, in education.

There is the problem, however, of how to maintain standards and strive for increased quality in a time of increasing costs. The average annual salary of classroom teachers in public elementary and secondary schools rose about eight percent last year over the preceding year, according to NCES. You already know salaries of instructional staff accoun for almost 1/2 of the total budget of a school district. In view of the rising costs in salaries and other school expenses, there is the challenge to keep local revenues commensurate with these increased costs.

While most school districts will feel a 1.2 percent drop in their total enrollments, major school systems such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Cleveland lost more than 10 percent of their students in the past five years. And in some areas of the country, school buildings are being closed down before they are finished being built. Consequences such as these raise critical questions as to when to close schools, implications on the community in doing so, and the possibilities of using schools for other purposes. The Education Division has responded to these circumstances by eliciting the input of your Association, the National Association of School Boards, and others of the education community in helping us put together a coherent research agenda.

Enrollment trends provide one set of clues as to the future directions of our educational system. The results of the National Assessment for Educational Progress funded by NCES gives us another. The National Assessment is the only National baseline data on the achievement of our Nation's students. The assessment tests our school children over regular intervals on the abilities that they will need in every day adult life -- to see whether our schools are actually preparing them for it.

Recent findings reveal that American teenagers are losing their ability to communicate through written English, that many consumers are not prepared to shop wisely

because of their inability to use fundamental math principles, and that the basic reading achievement of America's 17-year-old students has improved during the past few years.

The assessment carries on its testing without reporting scores for individual school systems or even the states. Yet more than 20 states have taken the initiative to do their own comparisons. I strongly urge local school districts to do the same, for you are the ones who must take students of many different appitudes and try to maximize their achievement.

Aptitude tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test measure a student's ability to learn -- it measures a relatively stable quality. Achievement tests, on the other hand, measure how much a student actually has learned from a given curriculum. This is a quality that varies. Therefore, if we want to know our true effectiveness as educators, achievement data surely deserves as much attention as had recently been given to the declining scores of college-bound students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test.

This afternoon I have described to you what I believe to be a rational delineation of the Federal role in education. It is an active role when the issues are national in scope, when a unified research agenda is the issue, or when we are assessing the progress of education. It is a reactive role when we must be responsive to the needs of the states and local school districts in these three areas. Ours is not a position from which we dictate educational policy to the states and local education agencies. Rather, we intend for the states and local school districts to have even more responsibility to determine the direction of educational priorities and programs in the future.

The Administration's Fiscal Year 1977 budget proposal includes a $3.3 billion request for a proposed consolidation of elementary and secondary education programs into bloc grants Major features of the proposed consolidation are:

--Program focus on the educationally disadvantaged and the handicapped

--Greater flexibility and fewer requirements for state and local education agencies to administer Federal programs

--An enhancement of the responsiveness of state and local education agencies -- involving open State planning and reporting with more opportunity for citizen involvement

--And simplified formula for distribution of funds -- with no matching requirements.

Over the past decade and a half, the Federal government has spent over a billion dollars on research and development on the country's pressing educational problems -- and billions more on categorical aid to schools and districts. And State and local fiscal support has been, of course, much, much larger. Yet, it is not solely the amount of money that we put into education that determines its success. There is one factor among many others that can significantly influence educational outcomes. It is cooperation among the Federal government, the states, local education agencies, and the education community. Only through our concerted efforts, only with a dedication to partnership, can we hope to make our schools equal to their potential.

It is my desire to make the relationship between the Education Division and the American Association of School Administrators even stronger, and to increase the dialogue between the Federal government and local school districts.

With an optimistic and determined spirit, I believe that such cooperation can raise the level of quality in our present educational system. Many improvements have occurred since 1776, and for all its problems and frailities, the American education system we know in 1976 has a more humanistic view, a greater commitment to its purposes, a far greater fund of useful knowledge on which to draw, and a greater consensus within its community

about the need for dedication to the principles of equality, than have existed ever before.

I suspect that our founding fathers would be extremely surprised at the magnitude, universality, and quality of twentieth century American education. Of our forefathers the one who had perhaps the greatest interest in education -- Thomas Jefferson -- once said:

> "The commonwealth requires the education of her people as the safeguard of order and liberty."

This is our charge -- yours and mine -- as we shape the destiny of American education in the rest of the twentieth century, I am confident that we will maintain that safeguard -- and I am hopeful that we will do it together.

Thank you.

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